

# Yearning for Utopia: Earth, Body, Deviance and Festive-Carnival Failure in *Cereus Blooms at Night* Curdella Forbes

“Eden and Gehenna laced together ...” LeGrace Benson (100)

“Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal.” Lawrence Buell (285)

## I. Caribbean Carnival: Providing a Context for Reading *Cereus Blooms at Night*

The two epigraphs above encapsulate my reading of Shani Mootoo’s challenge to the ideology of carnival in her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Though Mootoo’s text suggests the version of carnival embodied in Indo-Trinidadian marriage rites, particularly the associated cross-dressing rituals, the issues she raises have implications for the concept of carnival as a whole, as they suggest a rethinking of carnival as a trope of Caribbean identity.<sup>1</sup> Thus the text functions both as a critique of Indo-Trinidadian heterosexism and patriarchy, and as an interrogation of the traditional symbols of Caribbean community.

I will use the term ‘festive-carnival’ rather than ‘carnival’ to refer to the version that *Cereus* engages, since these marriage rites are not part of the mainstream event, but rather, festive occasions that, while conservative members of the Indo-Trinidadian community might dissociate them from carnival, nevertheless share not only the modes but intentions of the mainstream (creole) event.<sup>2</sup> These include the opening of a space of *différance* within which suppressed identities and relationships may find expression, and within which the collapse of boundaries may be imagined. At the same time, these festivals, like the carnival—though to a far more immediately intentional and apparent

degree—embody the paradox of containment, as they function to entrench the ethic of respectability, or traditionality, to which they appear opposed.<sup>3</sup>

*Cereus* belongs to the group of recent Caribbean writing on sex and sexuality, which unlike previous writings on these subjects has posed an open and radical challenge to traditional modes of imagining Caribbean identity.<sup>4</sup> In such narratives, individuals considered sexually deviant are often presented as being forced into traumatized splinter zones or zones of isolation outside of communal performance, even while they appear to be located within it. Indices of inclusion, such as carnival, then become forms of exclusion, and sex and sexuality become the fissure, or node of disruption, that tests the concept of the creolized community. *Cereus* and these other narratives of sex and sexuality belong to a larger emergent strand of writing in which we see increasing place being given to individual make-up and personal desire even in the most collectivist of narratives—these include narratives that engage the discourse of nation with a view to expanding the concept of the nation. We may think for example of the popular novels of Victor Headley, which insert into the body of the nation new versions of the criminal class, imbricated in personal desire rather than the heroic or ‘Robin Hood’ vision that once gave this class literary kudos; more mainstream novels such as Lawrence Scott’s *Aelred’s Sin* (1998) and Patricia Powell’s *A Small Gathering of Bones* (2003), which seek to expand the boundaries of the nation to include the sexually outcast/homosexual persona; Charles Carnegie’s cultural study *Postnationalism Prefigured* (2002), which replaces the colourized icons of nationhood—the black peasant and the mestizo, for example—with the solitary, fringe figure of the ‘dundus’ (the albino).

In some cases, such as the novels of Jamaica Kincaid and the travel narratives of V. S. Naipaul, it is even possible to argue that a discourse of individualism has begun to emerge in ways that are fully counter to the traditional discourses of nation and community. Not much attention has been paid to these emergent strands of discourse or the type and moment of post-nationalism that they mark, as these tend to be obscured by the current emphasis on globalization and transnational-

ity as the key challenges to familiar modes of identification.<sup>5</sup> Yet the moment is an important one as there is a particular anguish in the way writers addressing issues of sexuality in particular confront the search for alternative tropes by which to frame the nation and the community as imagined ideals. In some cases, the ideal gives way to despair, as I shall argue is the case with *Cereus Blooms at Night*, despite the novel's apparently hopeful conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues that Caribbean carnival is inextricably bound up with trauma—the need to aestheticize violence (22). He refers specifically to the violence of the plantation, but the carnival, a dynamic form, makes accommodations to deal with new experiences, traumatic and otherwise. Caribbean forms of Indian festivity arguably partake of the traumas specific to the multiple dislocations of the Kala Pani.<sup>7</sup> In her critique and refusal of the festive-carnival as a way of dealing with trauma, Mootoo seems to call for a complete revolution of body, self, landscape and culture, what I refer to as a yearning for Utopia. This she signals by the use of pastoral and apocalyptic metaphors usually found in environmentalist literature, a strategy which may suggest that Mootoo's vision for human change is a universalist one that requires a reordering of our relations with the natural world and our place in it. Both Hindu and Christian cosmology with which Mootoo is familiar, facilitate such a connection of the natural world with cultural and existential eidetics.

Mootoo's novel tells the intertwined stories of three sexually deviant persons of Indo-Trinidadian ethnicity, and although the story is set on a mythical island, Lantanacamara, its historical referents point to Trinidad between 1900 and the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Two of these major characters, the narrator Nurse Tyler and his love interest Otoh Mohanty, are ostensible males of indeterminate gender and sexual body: they are transvestite and may be intersexual (hermaphrodite), homosexual or bi-sexual. The other is Mala Ramchandin, who enters the story as an old woman consigned to the almshouse after being accused—and, in the eyes of some, dubiously acquitted—of the murder of her father who has kept her as his personal sex slave from childhood, following the defection of his wife to a lesbian lover.

The story, told by Tyler who becomes her nurse at the almshouse, is woven around Mala, but all three come together in an alternative community based on mutual attraction, the community's rejection, and the shared experience of sexual or sexually-related trauma. The stories of others who impact on their lives are woven into this core narrative and at times seem as large as theirs, but Tyler's narration, the fact as well as mode of it, identifies their primacy in the narrative.<sup>9</sup> The three occupy a liminal space on society's transverse side, and are able to negotiate this space, or not, depending on the strategies they choose. Otoh is the most successfully 'integrated' into the community, for reasons that will be explained as the text unfolds. Tyler and Mala are 'called in' at particular moments and in particular relationships, but thrust out and compelled into absence whenever their inclusion threatens rather than assists others' 'ethical' identity. For Mala, the absence finally becomes almost total.

In the effort to negotiate identity and trauma, the characters draw on Indo-Trinidadian cross-dressing practices associated with hetero-normative marriage rites. I should point out here that while the specifics of Mootoo's narrative compel my particular reading, cross-dressing in Indo-Trinidadian culture is not restricted to wedding festivities, nor is it peculiar to Indian festivity (Rampersad 38–39). In the wider culture, we may think, for example, of male maskers playing Belly Woman in the Jamaican Jonkunnu, or Dame Lorraine or Roba la Gallina in the Trinidad and Dominican (Republic) carnivals respectively. Thus, *Cereus* may be loosely viewed within the generalized context of cross-dressing as part of a Caribbean cultural praxis. However, my reading unearths a frame for speaking about the ethnic particularities of the characters' situation with regard to issues of sexuality, hetero-normativity and deviance.

In Tyler's case, it is the sarwan kumar, the dance performed by men on the bhatwan, or pre-wedding night that is suggested by Mootoo's treatment. This suggestion first appears in an early sequence of the Tyler-Mala narrative (80–82), where he cross-dresses for her as she parodies the communal practice of performative storytelling. The placement of the sequence, Tyler's sense of his body dancing, and the formulaic framing (Mala's use of the storyteller's and audience's ritual phrase 'Crick

Crack!') are significant, as their resonance structures Tyler's behavioural and narrative performance throughout, highlighting the extent to which his existence and self-representation become a forced and recuperative 'dance' around societal codes of conduct.

The eponymous sarwan kumar is a dance that enacts the story of Sarwan Kumar, one of the characters in the *Ramayana* who gives instruction on the merits of honouring one's parents (Rampersad 38). It is performed by men in both male and female roles, women's exclusion being linked to respectability as Indian women were traditionally not allowed to perform in public. While the dance theme is evidently a way of entrenching the cultural stability associated with marriage and the extended family, the dance also encodes a gender and sexual ambiguity that is at odds with its stated heterosexist intention. The dancer's role here parallels the hijra's at weddings and birth rituals in India; thus it participates in the sex-gender ambiguity associated with the hijra community, and invokes the hijra's dual status as both everyday outcast (curse) and ceremonial semi-insider (agent of—tenuous—blessing).<sup>10</sup> In the novel, the sarwan kumar segues into the hijra's performance through Otoh, who is more fully associated with the subcontinental than the Trinidadian persona.

In Mala's case, the rites suggested by her behaviour are those associated with matikor, the women's counterpart to the sarwan, performed two or three nights before the wedding. The pre-wedding ceremonies involve three ritual phases: the matikor, the obeisance to Mati, Earth Mother; the saffran, purification of the bride; and mehendi, the adornment of the bride. The performance of these around religious codes intertwined with sexually explicit dancing and bawdy interchange allows women an exclusively female space within which to give free rein to their sensual side without judgement or censure, even while the primary function is to induct the young bride into the strict codes of marriage and family expectation.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the two male figures, Mala does not actually cross-dress. However, her attempt to recode her body outside clothing, to remake it as a part of nature, may be read in the same terms as cross-dressing—that is, as a way of taking on another identity, though in this case fabricated

costume is replaced by the foliage of nature with which she becomes identified (here Mala literalizes the connection with Mati). Though they may be said to ‘mimic’ the rites, none of the characters are interested in disguise or the protection afforded by invisibility. None embraces the ethic of respectability towards which the rites are in normal contexts directed. Indeed, the enactment identifies the point at which they radically separate from society and its dictates, and make a conscious decision to ignore or risk the consequences. The overriding dynamic is the engagement with trauma as the characters attempt to return the beleaguered body from ‘not-self’ to its ‘true state of being.’

Since the concept of a true state of being is fraught with ontological contradictions, this attempt on the part of the protagonists gives further point to my usage of the phrase ‘yearning for Utopia.’ As Derek Walcott argues in his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry,” there is a sense in which the refusal or indictment of mimicry is a meaningless gesture, given that it is impossible to return to the place where we first became human, for “there is no ... distinction possible between the last ape and the first man, there is no memory or history of the moment when man stopped imitating the ape, his ancestor, and became human. Therefore, everything is mere repetition” (7).

‘Mere repetition’ invokes what I see as the ultimate tragedy of *Cereus*—the tyranny of culture, which delays Utopia. Walcott suggests that mimicry transcends itself in particular ‘moments of illumination’ when the experience of devastation and loss suffered by a people produces, indeed forces, a superb act of imagination, the impetus to make the world ‘new.’ And though it cannot in the ultimate sense be new, the ‘visioner’ nevertheless stands, through sheer force of circumstance, gifted with the capacity to (newly) name things. And indeed it may be argued, in the case of Tyler and Otoh at least, that their appropriation of the cross-dressing ritual constitutes just such a power of self-making and self-reclamation. They are able to exploit the liminal sites on which the festive-carnival masquerade produces the ‘codes of unseeing’ that allow deviant bodies and taboo sexualities to be at once facilitated and suppressed within community mores. It might even be said that their appropriation of the masquerade overturns the carnival order, for in shifting the masquerade

from festive-carnival space to everyday space, and making it a way or aspect of life rather than a performance, they give voice to the silenced, stigmatized trauma which the masquerade disavows.

Yet the search for a mode that returns the body to its primal origins—an ecology of connection with the body of the earth, or of the ‘earthedness’ of the body—by its very imbrication in the festive-carnival, is doomed, if not to outright failure, at least to an untenable dualism. The hopeful tone of the novel’s ‘resolution’ is constantly belied by this awareness, conveyed by a number of symbolic patternings that I shall discuss. It is through Mala, the main protagonist, that the final inability of the festive-carnival aesthetic to ameliorate trauma is most fully explored: if Tyler’s and Otoh’s ascent to Utopia is ambiguous, Mala’s is impossible. It is also through Mala that the Utopian search becomes twinned with apocalypse in ways that suggest the force of a moral law. Mala experiences her sexually traumatized body as a polluted environment which she must return to an imagined edenic state, prior to shame and guilt. The return to Eden requires both the devolution of the body back to living earth and the innocence of the first marriage; that is, the edge of chaos and the first dawn, the unmaking of the body and its retrieval. The attempt at synthesis is inevitably marked and conflicted by societal codes; ironically, the very rituals that highlight her exclusion from community since they are (by implication) reserved for the ‘pure’ and ‘respectable.’

By invoking the earth as a goddess figure, Mala’s ritual performance references the female principle of Hindu mythology: woman as an explosive site of contradictions: subordinate seed-space (territory), retributive maw and renewing earth.<sup>12</sup> The conjunction of these forces pushes Mala to violent conclusions, including self-torture, self-immolation and, possibly, parricide. Mala’s attempt at synthesis is revealed then as her appallingly methodical descent into madness, and we are struck by the ways in which the collective, both as ritual and as unconscious residual memory,<sup>13</sup> becomes instead a semiotic of psychic dissolution and psychic terror. Paradoxically, then, Mootoo’s narrative suggests the impossibility of an edenic return, as the search for the primal moment is infracted with the culture and the (personal) history it seeks to escape.

The Utopian ecology of the body, like festive-carnival costuming, in its failure signifies not only the condition of post-lapsarian mourning, but also the failure of the traditional rituals of community.

The fact that the final tragedy is Mala's indicates that the female, particularly in her sexual 'being,' is the final example of outsider status.<sup>14</sup> Although Mala is the unwilling child-victim of her father's sexual violence, he is never taken to task by the community, whereas she suffers numberless abuses in punishment both for being her father's woman and the child of her lesbian mother. The fact that Tyler and Otoh can perform unsanctioned identities in open spaces in the 'public' eye, while she is confined to interior spaces, points to several indices of inclusion/exclusion. Despite their gender and sexual ambiguity, Tyler and Otoh both present (appear) as men, which gives them a greater space of privilege. I am pointing here to the inequalities of gender—the fact of males being automatically subject to less punishment for perceived transgression. It may also be argued that the residual deposit of the festive-carnival in the collective consciousness, allows the community to pretend, by various modes of unconscious denial, that the disruption represented by Tyler's and Otoh's cross-dressing is not a disruption but an extension of the festive-carnival itself.

Through characters such as Mr. Hector's missing brother, the unnamed man who tries to pick up Otoh, the numbers of men who are assailed by lascivious thoughts of him (135), and Mavis who seems content with a semi-consummated relationship, never questioning the fact that her hands are not allowed to roam below his belt, Mootoo suggests that another reason for the 'blind eye' accommodation may be that gender and sexual ambiguities are not exactly unusual within the community. Silence becomes a form of self-acknowledgement. In Otoh's case, an additional factor is his association with stability, the fact that he chooses and sticks to a single sex-gender presentation so consistently that the 'threat' he poses becomes invisible. This has significant implications, if sex as well as gender can be a matter of perception.

Because Tyler is an effeminate male who vacillates between male and female dress, he is immediately more 'visible' than Otoh and therefore, unlike the latter, subjected to ridicule. However, he enjoys an increas-



ing accommodation *within the confines of the almshouse*. Three reasons may be adduced for this: first, Tyler's vacillation makes it easy for his behaviour to be received as 'performance'; that is, as a stepping in and out of role. This fixes him, like the sarwaneer dancer (or the hijra) as spectator entertainment, particularly since, in the female space of the almshouse, he occupies a non-threatening category. It is debatable whether he would have enjoyed this freedom in the larger community, among men, towards whom his sexual interest is directed. Indeed, Tyler constantly speaks of the extreme care he takes to tailor his body's movements respectably and hide its responses to other men's bodies. Another factor that modifies Tyler's containment is his acceptance of abasement (although a qualified nurse, he is assigned menial cleaning jobs in 'punishment' for his effeminacy) and his usefulness to the almshouse, particularly as he is the only one able or willing to undertake the care of Mala. At the same time, the women's laughter keeps him separate, indexes his deviance from the normative 'us.' Throughout, Tyler continues to struggle with the pain of this twilight existence, even as Otoh must struggle, in private scenes, to keep parts of his body hidden.

Mala's situation is different. Incest and rape are unspeakable acts, which the community cannot effectively confront without radically revising its view of its own sexual whole[some]ness. As a result, it has developed no psychological frames to deal with these issues. Not surprisingly then, the problem posed by Mala's existence is ignored. That is to say, the silence surrounding Mala is not the silence of dualistic accommodation but of erasure. This marks the effort to protect social space from the spread of pollution and by extension, uncontrollable trauma. Mala's erasure more specifically highlights the isolation of the Indo-Trinidadian female in the early part of the twentieth century.

Doubly cloistered by cultural difference, which was well espoused by the Indian community as a marker of separate identity, and by the Brahminic and Muslim traditions, which sought to relegate the female to domestic spaces, the Indian female would have been seen by other ethnic groups, particularly Africans, as someone to be left strictly alone. The methods by which she was included/enclosed in Indian ethnic identity then functioned to exclude her from wider *cynosure*, which ironi-

cally might also have been protective. The private-public differential of the sarwan kumar, performed in public by men who are free to play as women, and matikor, performed in and as female space by women only, further signifies Mala's extreme situation *vis à vis* that of Tyler and Otoh. Mala's case also highlights the vulnerability of the child in society—and this is an important intervention given that the child in the bildungsroman all too often figures as a type of the adult in becoming. Mootoo's narrative of devolution back to innocence, and beyond that to chaos, is a radical refusal of the modernist teleology of the bildungsroman.

If we read the text by realist codes, the idea that an entire community could so completely ignore the plight of a child is beyond credibility, especially in the Caribbean, where everyone often knows his/her neighbours' business and interferes in it, for good as well as ill. The fictitious island, as well as the techniques of marvelous realism scattered throughout the text without a real commitment to marvelous realism as a way of characterizing the society,<sup>15</sup> implies the metaphorical nature of the setting: its character as prototypical rather than literalized. Mootoo seems more interested in highlighting the plight of the silenced than in realistic portrayal, and she seems concerned to make the finest distinctions between what is possible and what is not. The novel persistently asks: What are the conditions under which gender and sexual ambiguity can paradoxically facilitate survival? What are the conditions that push social codes to their limits? Even the carnival, seen as the prototypical equalizer in its capacity to collapse boundaries, remains hierarchically coded precisely because its intention is dual: to reinforce respectability by allowing the challenge to respectability.

As I indicated above, I believe this is true of the mainstream carnival as well as of the Indian festive-carnival, though to different degrees. The licence given in the pre-marriage rituals to cross-dress, sing bawdy songs and perform sexually explicit dances is licence to role-play the sexual act that will shortly be celebrated in the acceptable confines of matrimony. The segregation of male and female performers highlights respectability as the main value; the song and dance as sexual abandon signal the hope that the female will display a similar abandon under her husband's authoritative, authorized sexual ministrations. Similarly, although the

mainstream carnival has long moved away from its association with the French religious calendar, the belief that one participates in the abandon of carnival because one will shortly be required to participate in the (respectable) flesh-denial of Lent, is still very much alive.

In addition, as Shalini Puri has pointed out, in the Caribbean the carnival ethos exists side by side with a strong ethos of respectability; my own view is that there is a point of intersection where each legitimizes the other. Indeed, the carnival became 'respectable' from the moment it moved out of 'jammed'<sup>16</sup> space to become an authorized national symbol. Gerard Aching also makes a very telling point regarding the appropriation of carnival by various private and economic interests:

It is precisely because of the growing privatization of popular cultural forms and practices that it has become crucial to transcend the romanticized view of masks and masking. To the extent that this view is still held to be certain, it encourages and perpetuates particular socially significant invisibilities under the sign of collective revelry. (3)

Part of what Aching's statement unveils is the way in which the ownership of the mainstream carnival by particular interests works to erase those persons and groups considered 'unrespectable,' even while its 'revelry' implies inclusive iconoclasm.

Similarities between Indian festival and the mainstream carnival are not merely generic: they are also due to the fact that each has increasingly over time intersected and creolized the other. The 'staging' of the religious festival of Phagwah, or Holi, in public spaces attracts the spectatorship of the non-Indian populace, with tantalizing possibilities for conscious and unconscious shifts in the performance in tandem with audience response. Indeed Kris Rampersad points to a range of Indian festivities, both religious and secular, that were publicly staged from as early as the 1870s (31–47). And of course, the fact that the Indian populace in the early twentieth century routinely witnessed the larger carnival, allows us to imagine that the ritual donning, playing and discarding of multiple identities was reinforcing, in that part of the populace also, a psychological ability to accommodate deviance, through veils

of tolerance including slippage, the unconscious imputation of carnival time to otherwise inassimilable happenings, and the perception that there are material benefits to be reaped from pretending. That *Cereus*' Indo-Trinidadian characters are conceived within this creolizing history is seen in the fact that many of them have English first names although their last names are Indian; indeed, it is sometimes difficult to be sure of the characters' ethnicity.

Puri and Baksh-Sooden discuss the advent of chutney, a creolized form in which women have taken sexually explicit dances out of the female cloister of matikor and laawa, and displayed them in public competitions as part of mainstream carnival. In chutney men and women perform together, merging dances performed separately in the traditional marriage rites. Chutney is further '*douglarized*'<sup>17</sup> by its amalgamations of classical Indian and calypsonian musics to produce chutney-soca. Puri notes the dual reputation of these changes among Indo-Trinidadian conservatives, who hail chutney for giving classical Indian culture the national status of carnival, and demonize chutney-soca for 'publicizing' sexual matters and promoting douglarism. This contradictory attitude, or 'double consciousness' is an instance of how 'the blind eye of accommodation' may be turned towards what one despises, such as the sex and gender deviations accomplished by cross-dressing. To a large extent, the desire to preserve Indian tradition and protect it from 'contamination' on the one hand, and the attempt to effect such preservation by hybridizing strategies on the other, may both be viewed as forms of yearning for Utopia—the creation of a narrative of 'pure' origins similar to millenarian and pre-lapsarian (pre-colonial) myths of Africa that undergird African diasporic ideologies such as Rastafarianism and Negritude, which are themselves of necessity deeply creolized.

## II. Transforming Bodies and Utopia: The Failure of Re-Dress

*Cereus*' concern with body and masquerade is made obvious through its textual metaphors. With regard to the former, virtually every human experience in this book is rendered in terms of bodily response. Thus, in an adversarial confrontation with his mentor and demi-god, Rev erend Thoroughly, Mala's father "felt his chest shrink and his breathing become

shallow" (35); the young Tyler, troubled by the thought that his beloved Nana may ultimately be unable to accept his unorthodox sexual identity, asks himself "would this particular nature be coarse sandpaper drawing blood against her?" (48); Popoh (Mala's child-persona) grows "weak and dizzy" (59) when she discovers the secret liaison between her mother and Lavinia; and Otoh faints from the impact of his first (and last) face to face encounter with Mala. The natural universe has visceral effects on the body: the scent of decay; of latrines; of "rotting, water-logged wood"; of "worm-rich, root-matted earthiness," assails not only the nostrils but the entire body, weaving through hair and penetrating pores (115).

Often, descriptions of visceral bodily experience are intricately meshed with patterned references to the desire to be somewhere or somebody else—to, as it were, escape the *locality* of experience within particular types of bodies, and its *groundedness* in particular types of place (237). This desire is fulfilled in the Lantanacamaran (Indo-Trinidadian) setting in specific, ironic ways. We are told that Mala's grandfather took the opportunity offered by indenture partly because "in Lantanacamara it was easier [than in India] to slip out of caste" (26–27). Slipping out of caste refers not only to the dislocations and reorderings that attended the migratory experience, but more specifically to the ability to change self or circumstance, that is afforded by bodily masquerade. This is made evident when Mala's grandparents are advised by other villagers to appear to convert to Christianity in order to reap the benefits of upward mobility: "Nobody but you really know which God you praying to ... And when you praying you pray with you *eyes* and you *mouth* shut" (29; emphasis added).

This invocation of the body as an instrument of theatre addresses historical Caribbean practice as attested in the carnival, Anancy and other types of camouflage. Mootoo censures the use of masquerade where such use distorts rather than liberates 'true being,' by showing how it produces bodily trauma. Mala's father—the next generation—adopts bodily pretence so successfully that his appearance (of conformity and respectability) allows some villagers to disbelieve that he had raped his child. When we first meet Chandin he is busily switching identity from Caribbean Indian to white Christian gentleman of the

Shivering Northern Wetlands, in keeping with the delusion of upward mobility. Chandin's 'mimic man' (in the Naipaulian sense) masquerade is described in theatrical terms: "he sat on the stage among the other Wetlandish missionaries and was often the centre of attention" (30).

The text offers another description of Chandin, with touches of *picong*<sup>18</sup> humour, in terms of the dualities of carnival. For example, in describing his 'secret passion' for the white Lavinia, Mootoo invokes the twin poles of tragedy and revelry out of which comic laughter arises: "He stroked his chin habitually and reveled in the tragic knowledge that his lovesickness could bleed so freely within him and yet be invisible, or so he thought, to the family with whom he lived and to his schoolmates" (34). Yet this laughter is darkened and undercut by metaphors of the tortured body, a more ominous framing of the idea that Chandin is selling his soul for a sop from the missionaries' table:

Chandin took note of the Reverend's rigid, austere posture, so unlike his own father's propensity to bend or twist or fold his body whichever way the dictates of comfort tipped him. He practised sitting upright, with his back unswayed and his legs planted firmly on the ground or crossed severely at the knees.... When he walked, even though he had, by the age of fourteen, reached his full height and was quite short, he made strides as wide as the towering Reverend's, and he clasped his hands similarly, in a little entwined knot behind his back. (34)

The effort proves futile, as shown both by Chandin's "dark brown [Indian] ears" (35) sticking up out of this [white] masquerade and the Reverend's putting him in his place soon after. The radical trauma of the distorted body and by extension the distorted psyche conveyed in the passage above is given more point in the contrasting description of what happens when he begins to change his relationship with the Thoroughlys. Mootoo elaborates the changing relationship by the simple statement: "His body began to accede to its inherited nature.... A faint echo of his father's curvature developed ..." (49).

This clear indictment against a masquerade that is undertaken for material gain and at the expense of personal and cultural integrity, becomes

also an indictment of the ethic of respectability, and prepares us for the reversal inherent in Tyler's cross-dressing as a means of true self-expression. That Tyler's first masquerade is in the nature of a bhatwan (pre-wedding night) dance is signaled by the fact that it precedes his first meeting with Otoh Mohanty, as though he had mysteriously intuited the other's coming. It is signaled also in his expression of diffidence when he shows himself to Mala: "At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women's clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun. I felt flatfooted and clumsy, not a man nor ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence" (77).

The putting on of women's clothing 'for sport' and for 'an allotted period' are obvious references to carnival space and time. Tyler seeks relief from his intolerable state (of never being free to express his sexual/gender identity openly) by looking to the only community he has at this point—Mala, who had given him the dress and with whom he had already identified himself as he had gleaned fragments of her story. When Mala allows him to step out of limbo—that is, normalizes the gap between carnival and everyday time/space by simply accepting his appearance, he exclaims with relief, "She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (77). Tyler's sense of body freedom is presented in terms that imply a sexually explicit dance: he speaks of his body metamorphosing, becoming plump and more fluid, of noticing the *swirl* of hair on his calves, of "doing battle" with his "man's member" (76–77).

Tyler goes behind the room divider to put on the dress, but steps out from behind it to show himself to Mala, thereby erasing the distance of decorum and fully enacting their participatory relationship in the 'dance.' Symbolically, the separation of the male dancers (sarwan kumar) from the female dance (matikor) is erased and in the same way that Tyler's body loosens into freedom, the cross-dressing ritual is loosened from the traditionalist aspect of the festive-carnival and aligned more to its disruptive aspect. The context merges suggestions of chutney and the Indian hijra dance. Geeta Patel notes that hijras often visit homes to perform for women the exact songs (gali) that women on both

sides of a marital equation sing to each other. "Hijras [perform] in the liminal space of the threshold," she observes, "a set of explicit songs that had otherwise been sung exclusively between and by women inside the home" (144).

Although he tells us immediately after that he did not dare to go outside the secret confines of Mala's room in the dress, since "I was endowed with a sense of propriety, [indeed] depended on it ... for the most basic level of survival" (78), this first performance marks the beginning of Tyler's growth in confidence about his sexual identity, and prepares him, as the pre-marital ceremonies prepare the bride and groom, for his first meeting with Otoh. He openly displays his attraction "I was compelled to look directly into his eyes" (101) and grows increasingly reckless. Serendipitously, his new boldness in wearing sexually ambiguous dress (97) coincides with the almshouse community's growing acceptance due to his usefulness as Mala's nurse; even so, it is this first moment wearing the dress that comes to mind when he throws restraint to the winds and begins to appear in public (that is, in the almshouse garden) "in lipstick colour more [thick] than usual" (247), scented and attired "like a peacock in heat" (246).

Tyler's self-delighting laughter suggests his sense of freedom, but the tandem self-mockery registers inhibition, and we are reminded that the novel ends without his having ventured in this costume or in Otoh's company beyond the confines of the almshouse/women's garden. The validating community is still the 'outcast' and 'deviant' group made up of Mala and Otoh's dysfunctional father Boyie.<sup>19</sup> The body's return to itself/its own earthedness is still provisional and contingent, still truncated by cultural space. This is fittingly seen in the imagery of displacement where Mootoo shifts emphasis from the viscerally experiencing body to the costumed body. Astonishingly in this book where the body registers feeling in volcanic metaphors, at the height of his ecstasy over Otoh Tyler speaks not of his own physical responses but of having "daubed enough scent to make a Puritan cross his legs and swoon" (247). By these signals the disruptive potential of the festive-carnival, which, in Bakhtin's formulation (12), pushes towards a Utopian transformation, is presented as decisively curtailed. Another complicating aspect



of Tyler's situation arises when we begin to speculate about how the relationship with Otoh may be physically consummated: immediately the body itself becomes a site of sliding signifiers which suggest that any certainty about the body's 'identity,' what its 'true state of being' might be, is irresistibly compromised.

Otoh's seamless transformation from girl to boy is accomplished in a much more open and therefore shocking scenario: in full view of both his parents and the community who appear to be totally oblivious to the change. At one level, the parents' oblivion is the sign of their self-absorbed alienation but also, in his father's case, the refusal to take responsibility for anything. Boyie's inaction is related to an aspect of the carnival hinted at in Earl Lovelace's portrayal (*The Dragon Can't Dance*)—the temptation to become so immersed in its function as play, as fantasy, that its disruptive political functions are contained, and more efficacious forms of action deferred. Boyie's link to this debilitating aspect of the carnival is made apparent in the fact that its linguistic expression fascinates him most. His verbal cross-dressing—flowery obfuscations and convoluted syntaxes—are a burlesque caricature of 'upper class' (Shivering Northern Wetland) English and comes across as a parody of a parody: the Midnight Robber's boast.

Boyie's self-deprecating refusals and retreats recall the Robber's self-aggrandizing advances: too lazy and cowardly to visit Mala himself, he deploys Otoh to do it for him: "If fortune sees fit to grant you the pleasure of an audience with her ... may I impose upon you, my treasured son, the honour of conveying to her wishes for an incomparably good day from one Mr Ambrose Mohanty, also known to her as Boyie?" (145). Repeatedly Mootoo calls attention to Boyie's fascination with his own performative eloquence (197, 211). His mode of expression takes on a Derridian irony as it is clearly a means of deferring confrontation with anything, even the meaning of language itself, as appears in his extended discourse on the inadequacy of syntax, lexicon and nomenclature to express true experience, which is received in the body and signified in the movement of blood (211). Boyie's tendency to speak about the speech of the body rather than to live it, and to speak about intention rather than intend it, reveals itself as a refusal of the possibil-

ity of trauma inherent in all living engagement. Finally, this tendency is revealed as a desire for a conflictless Utopia, signified in Boyie's desire to live among the insects and build bridges of levitation, 'brilliant and breathless,' from the silken thread of spiders (215).

The substitution of speech for act reaches its apogee in Boyie's endless deferral of the sex act; when his circumlocutions exhaust themselves and he finally makes love to Mala, he retreats in a dreadful fright and abandons her to her father's gentle ministrations. The attempt to get Otoh to take his place with Mala, through symbolic acts such as bringing her food and the gramophone, operates as a form of incest taboo that allows Boyie to accommodate his daughter's sex-gender transformation. That is to say, Otoh's boyhood is needed if he is to be his father's proxy knight; however, food and music set the permissible limits of substitution, by standing in for the sex act (Otoh understands these limits because, tellingly, on the night he finally dances with Mala, he too runs away before the dance can transpose into something more risky). Through Boyie the novel's pattern of moral censure is extended when he is seen as an obverse side of Chandin, the masquerader through whom masquerade fulfills its destructive quotient, in the one case violent, in the other, passive.

Yet Boyie's character facilitates both Otoh's freedom-making transformation and (by his abandonment) Mala's Utopian reach after wholeness—the agency she displays in self-rescue, even in the midst of psychic disintegration. Otoh emerges from a chrysalis on Boyie's blindside:

Elsie gave birth to a girl ... The transformation was flawless. Hours of mind-dulling exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juices defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl. (110)

The extreme physical trauma to which Ambrosia/Otoh willfully subjects her/his body in order to transform from female to male suggests some powerful sense of a hidden potentiality, some 'true sense' of being, that the child does not feel is manifested in the outward form in which

s/he appears to have been born. Otoh's is not a simple case of changing clothes or transvestitism—the physical exercise allows this hidden potentiality, the “angular, hard-bodied creature” to burst forth out of the chrysalis of her/his girl's skin. Otoh lives this identity so consistently and comfortably that, as already discussed, the fact that it is a sex-gender shift is never noticed.

Yet the continuing anomaly, the sense that his is a double-sided body (otoh botoh) whose doubleness must be kept hidden from view, is brought to the reader's attention in small statements of fissure: not letting Mavis see below his belt, the sudden hunger to share his secret with Mala, that causes him to switch back to female dress when he goes to visit her one night. The terror in which Otoh flees when he thinks he might have been seen, even by Mala, recalls Tyler's sense that disguise is the basic condition of survival. The moment of fissure suggests that for Otoh the appearance of equilibrium may in fact be trauma uneasily managed, carefully secreted and tamped down. The choice made, one side at the expense of the other, has set the limits of Otoh's escape from societal strictures—even the masquerade is not enough.

Two things identify Otoh more closely with the hijra than with the sarwaneer dancer. One is that his biological sex is nebulous: the context suggests that he might be intersex, but he might just as easily be someone with an overwhelming transvestite urge, or a cross-dressing gay. The second is that, like the hijra, he lives his chosen sex as a way of life rather than an occasional performance.<sup>20</sup> The symbolism of the hijra as the agent of blessing who brings the promise of fertility to the marriage, is activated when he meets Mala. In a sense, Otoh enters into Mala's marriage rites, when he dances with her to the music of his father's gramophone, in the threshold space between her house and the saman tree. The music is jazz, the expression of New World liminality, which is also the disruption of orthodoxy and linear expectations. Mala initiates the dance, in an explicitly sexual sequence that recalls the matikor night. The frame of the threshold and the shared dance between male and female in the privacy of the home recalls the ways in which the hijra is allowed to disrupt boundaries between contamination and blessing, male and female, exclusion and inclusion.

Imagining Otoh as a hijra figure in this context highlights ways in which Mootoo reshapes the figure of the outcast. Significantly, where the hijra is an object of fear as much as awe, and where this fear is partly linked to his propensity to hurl curses and insults if he is not welcomed or remunerated, Otoh distances himself from the insults and curses that children in the community hurl at Mala. Thus positions are reversed and it is the community that functions as the agent of fear, while Otoh emblemizes the spirit of open acceptance and would seem therefore to transcend the debilitating contradictions of hijra status. Yet anomalies remain. The hijra is never associated with consummation, since after the wedding dance he returns to his place as social outcast. In this light, the dualities of Otoh's and Mala's meeting suggest an untenable quality in the reconciliation afforded by societal rites. The occasion shifts between the sense of day and night, waking and consciousness (Mala, half dreaming, keeps her eyes closed to avoid entering 'the day with its cutting brightness'); between the invocation of marriage and its denial (Mala mistakes Otoh for Boyie, her imagined bridegroom, unaware that he is married with a child). Otoh's fertility dance freezes at the level of symbolism: Mala will die childless and unwed, and although when he first entered the yard he thought "he had stumbled unexpectedly on a lost jungle, and ... would have sworn he was in a paradise" (155), this paradise (Eden, Utopia) is swiftly shattered by the apocalyptic revelation of Chandin's rotting corpse.

If the text never makes it clear whether Chandin died of natural causes or from the accident or by Mala's deliberate act (229), it does emphasize the earth's devouring, retributive power, both in the odour—the "gaseous belch" (162)—of his putrefaction and the "heavy sheet [of moths] that was slowly devouring the corpse underneath" (184). Otoh's hijra dance does bless Mala, because their encounter leads to her rescue, the meeting of the three, the writing of her story, and the hope of reuniting with her sister. But the novel ends without her reintegration into society, without her having regained her faculties or her speech, and within the twilight space of the almshouse, suspended between inside and outside worlds.

In my discussion of Mala I centralize the moment which she decides to abandon words and revert to 'body speech,' the grunts, sighs, cries,

belches, sneezes, coughs, expulsions of wind, spit and laughter (126–27) that signal her retreat from society and her acceptance of a visceral connection with matter and the materiality of her body:

[V]erbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, her lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path. (126–27)

This return to Genesis is signaled also in Mala's identification with the animal world and immersion in cosmic time: "... she settled into a monotone whose pitch varied, harmonizing with whichever insects' shrills prevailed on a particular day ... She started cooing, rasping, gargling,—the sounds made by the pigeons on her roof.... She did not ascribe activities to specific times. If she awakened in the height of the night's darkness, she ... arose as though it were daytime" (127).

In the same way that her return to Earth takes place at twin points of engagement: the beginning in chaos (the earth in darkness, without form, and void, the inchoate maw of possibility), and the moment of birth—the telluric womb emerging out of chaos—so her enactment of the matikor ritual is both a reversal (unravelling, devolution) and a re-creation of the ceremonies. The double frame attests to her need for release and self-reclamation on the one hand, and, on the other, her irresistible feeling that the contamination she has suffered cannot be addressed in the known world. Both sides of the equation are layered with a sexual imperative, attesting to the unholy 'marriage' into which her father has forced her, and the yearning for the 'true' marriage, the return of her sexual will and virgin rites in the relationship with Boyie.

It is in the extended sequence detailing Mala's acts of renunciation, purification and renewal between the competing domains of sun and moon (129–135, 138) that I identify her actions as open to reading in terms of a distorted matikor ritual. The sequence highlights the Gordian knot of continuity, contradiction, rupture, subjugation and agency at the centre of which Mala struggles and disintegrates. Mootoo uses three interlocking narrative moments that appear to correspond to the three phases of the pre-wedding ritual. The first narrative moment, in which Mala collects dead creatures in her bucket, reveling in the concentrated smell of decay—"the aroma of transformation" of "life refusing to end" (128)—parallels the obeisance to Mati, in which matter as fertility and life force is reverentially embraced. In Mala's production, however, it is matter in its guise as paradox, "death feeding life" (130) that comes to the fore. At the same time, several things bring into stark relief the desolation that she helplessly embraces and seeks to exorcise: the investment in the smell of rot rather than anointing perfumes; her lone performance of a rite in which she would normally have been surrounded by other women, including older women who would have played a 'priestly,' validating role on the bride's behalf; and the narrator's statement that her "companions were the garden's birds, insects and reptiles" (127).

The homage to Earth is usually performed in a spot where the earth is rich and there is clean running water. Mala's ritual procession in this first narrative moment leads her past stagnant water, through rain that has created "a dangerous green and black slime" on the back stairs, and terminates by "a concrete slab that had risen out of the washed away dirt" (132). On one level, what is suggested are the ways in which history (time passing, signaled in the rain's deposit of slime) and culture (the technology of the concrete slab) make the return to Eden impossible. But on another level, the sequence makes vividly clear Mala's radical attack on the intolerable state of duality, her attempt to close the gap between Death and Life, Nature and Social Law, who is considered loveable and who is not. This is another reason her fertility rite emphasizes not purification but putrefaction and the seeming impossibility of her life without it. The repeated images of nature feeding on its own detritus chart Mala's attempts at catharsis through bizarre parallels and

inversions: putrefaction as a natural, life-giving occurrence cancels out putrefaction as rot and stigma in her own abused life; an acceptance of rot makes nature her one safe haven and community (here she is most assuredly beloved); putrefaction replaces duality with paradox, so one may then, like Osiris, the sown Egyptian god, die in order to come once again alive. Reincarnation in nature's universe is not bound to the wheel of karma; the social law of sin and ongoing retribution is erased by the natural law of transformation, to which no moral contingencies apply.

The initiating moment of the *matikor* is declarative, an open statement of the right to sensual abandon, unpoliced by a regulating patriarchal gaze. The ritual traditionally takes place at night, with candles to light the procession. In an act of defiance, Mala performs the second narrative moment in broad daylight, at high noon, when "the sun would catch on a jagged edge of the back porch where the iron was torn" and cause the spot to "dazzle white like a blinding star" (132). She aims to blind the sun, a reminder of incestuous paternal authority and sexual violence, as its ascent always induces excruciating trauma in her body, particularly its sexual nodes ("In anguish Mala would clutch her blouse, petticoat, handkerchief into a ball *in front of her breast*" [132; emphasis added]). 'Blinding the sun' is another way of phrasing Mala's rejection of her father's control on her sexual body, by which her sensual freedom is destroyed. At this point, Mala enacts the second and third phases of the ceremonies—the purification and adornment of the bride—in her preparation and infliction of the pepper sauce on her face and digestive system. Pepper (turning the rock a brilliant red, the colour of the bride's dress and decoration) mixed with lime (for cleansing)<sup>21</sup> replaces the henna and saffron that anoint and ornament the bride.

The beautification ritual that is meant to enhance the bride's sex appeal for her husband-to-be, is parodied in Mala's attempt to annihilate the source of this appeal by disfiguring her face through the most shocking form of self-torture: "She raised the bottle to her face, shoved the open rim against her face, her nose deep inside, a wet, red ring imprinting across her nose, cheeks and lips.... Her sinuses released a flood against the fire trying to break through" (132–3). The destruction of sex appeal segues into the body's annihilation: as she shovels hot pepper into

her mouth until parts disintegrate, other parts curl back and the roof of her mouth bubbles (133–4), we hear Mala's anguished, relieved voice behind the narrator's: "Her flesh had come undone" (134). Like her equal enjoyment of stink and fragrance, rot and renewal, this 'undoing of her flesh' focalizes Mala's undoing of the incestuous 'marriage' and her exigent desire to die into new life ("every tingling blister and eruption was a welcome sign ... She was alive") [134]), but equally suggests her sense of deserved punishment and deferred grace.

In the third narrative moment, Mala prepares herself for the 'true' marriage, symbolized in her anxious vigil, waiting for the cereus to bloom. Mala's complete identification with nature appears in the fact that the festive-carnival splendour of her (anti)marriage rite is made not by the costumes of women in a socially coded frame, but by the astonishing riot of the cereus, the sensual climbing plant that blooms once, at night: "The succulents, half a dozen plants in all, had raged over the side of the house ... The sight of the buds made her giddy" (130). Here Earth, not societal codes of decency, sets the time of consummation: "She ... looked forward to the night of their opening" (130). "Earth too, provides the colours of her festival, the virgin white of the cereus and the medley of [pepper] reds in which Mala had earlier exulted" (131).

That the cereus is associated with sensual love and fertility as well as a protective female-feminine principle is made clear by the context of image and allusion in which Mala waits for its opening. We are told that it blossoms in moonlight; that the moon itself, and concomitantly, the desire of lovers, also blossoms (134–5); that the scent of the blossoms sends "an urgent call to insects and bats to find and pollinate [them]" (138); that the buds, huge, white (sensual and innocent) danced, "trembling as they unfolded against the wall, a choreography of petal and sepal opening together, sending dizzying scent high and wide into the air" (134); and that for Mala and others dreaming of love, the experience is orgasmic, shifting from intoxication to delirium to the body's exhausted "slump" (138).

The plant's symbolization of a transcendent possibility in which life outstrips its paradoxical relation with death, is conveyed through its 'heady perfume,' which replaces the "odour of age, filth and rot that



normally permeated her yard" (135).<sup>22</sup> And indeed, it may be said that in her connection with the visceral materiality of the 'bodied' universe, Mala has come further than any of the other characters towards the possibility of a return to innocence. Yet, again, that possibility is suspended at the level of yearning, not only because the blooms last for one night only, but because the moment of Mala's most profound identification with this universe is also the most complete inscription of her absence from human society and the absence of human society from her.

Significantly, Mala's story at this point is intercalated by the narrative of Otoh's walk with Mavis, both of them drawn by the scent of the cereus, Mavis pleading unavailingly with the sexually incapable Otoh, to take her on a romantic visit to El Dorado Park. Otoh, whose previous name, Ambrosia, is associated with the nectar (symbolizing the utopian heights) of the gods, was named for his father Ambrose (Boyie), the conspicuously absent companion, whose go-between to Mala Otoh has become. As the absent figure in the cereus equation, Boyie is inscribed not only by Otoh's impotent surrogate presence but also by the narrator's observation that when the moon blossoms as it did on the night of the cereus, "no one ... wants to be caught without a companion for the evening" (135). But Mala is alone.

Bakhtin, reflecting on the origins of the European carnival as a form of reconciliation between life and death, argues that the carnival facilitates the "coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (21). More accurately, it seems to me, carnival straddles a twilight zone between real time and time imagined, and evinces the *desire* to take experience back to the first, unrecoverable moment, before mimicry. Puri rightly argues that Bakhtin's view is naively utopian because "carnival's reversals and degradations are symbolic reinscriptions of power *along several axes*" (256; emphasis original). The imbrication of the festive-carnival structure within Mala's creative-devolutionary acts, no less than the absence of appropriate intervention from the community, inhibits their fulfillment.

Haunted by the spectre of her father and the nebulous ghost of Boyie the absent groom, Mala's search for Eden (the first place, before history)

is compromised by the shift to utopia (a place already lost, contaminated by history) which no human structure can purify. And even the furthest reach of her devolution is haunted by the Hindu narratives of identification: woman as *prakti*: nature, the undifferentiated matter of the universe, polluting and polluted (Mohammed). The smell of death feeding life around and within her house, drives the community further away, even as that smell is the most astonishing sign of an unimagined possibility for social renewal.

Mootoo's attempt at a hopeful ending registers perhaps her own yearning for utopia, which she seems to admit as an imagined ideal, both through the fracturing dualities and by locating her story in a fictional place. The unreconciled poles of her narrative structure—the tension between the unreadably<sup>23</sup> brutal passages in which she “unclothes” Mala's rape in a radical attempt to lay bare the ugly truth, and the self-mocking, *picong* humour of Tyler's narration as self-protective masquerade (clothing)—perhaps reveal the limitations of narrative art as a way of imposing order on the world. For surely if anything becomes apparent between Mootoo's technique of stripping and Tyler's representational cloaking, it is that catharsis for the reader remains totally delayed.

## Notes

- 1 The concept of the Caribbean as a carnivalesque society is endemic to Caribbean literary and cultural discourse. Examples of texts that contribute to this idea are Abrahams, Benítez-Rojo, Nunley and Bettelheim and Aching. See also Forbes, *Nation*.
- 2 I am using the term ‘creole’ here with its Trinidadian meaning, to refer to the general ‘mixed’ society outside Indian culture—that is, as a marker of separation between black, hybridized Trinidad and the notion of an Indian cultural identity and practice separated from this.
- 3 Bakhtin's concept of carnival in *Rabelais* tends to envisage a dynamic within carnival, that works to overturn ‘official’ culture. Increasingly I incline to the opposite view, that carnival practice serves a regulatory and officializing function, that there is far more synthesis between its traditionalizing and subversive poles than Bakhtin allows for. See also Aching. Puri argues that phagwah is a carnival, despite its induction into discourses of Indian separatist (by implication respectable) identity.
- 4 Treatment of sex and sexuality, including issues of deviance, of course has a long history in Caribbean literature, in some instances fairly open, in oth-

ers veiled or muted. See King and Rahim. However, literary treatment sex and sexuality as *primary interruptions* of the narratives of Caribbean identity is a post-1980s phenomenon. Literary criticism surrounding these issues is new, unlike the literature itself. The emphases coincide with the growing internationalization of (usually controversial) discourse on sexual attitudes and practices in the Caribbean: this has been facilitated by the export of popular culture (especially music, such as Jamaican dancehall) as well as the increasing visibility of gays, lesbians and transsexuals in societies within the geographical Caribbean.

- 5 I deal at length with this issue of an emergent literary individualism that complicates the picture of nationalism more radically than do the discourses of globalization and diaspora, in my essay "Fracturing Subjectivities."
- 6 To a large extent, texts such as by Powell, Scott and Kincaid suggest, to varying degrees and on different levels, this despair with specific reference to the plight of homosexuals, and more particularly as the issue of AIDS (despite the fact that AIDS is also a heterosexual disease), affects the lives of homosexuals who are then doubly silenced, whether by their own self-censoring in fear of the community, or by deliberate exclusions on the part of communal groups.
- 7 Mehta discusses the Kala Pani—the Indian 'Middle Passage' or crossing of the Atlantic—as a trope of Indo-Caribbean female experience, which includes marginalization, silenc/ing and the tensions of cultural in-betweenity, which may be as traumatic as they may be creative.
- 8 It is fairly easy to place the novel in historical time, through clues such as the presence of the Methodist missionaries, who sought to carve out a space of influence particularly among the Indian population in the first part of the twentieth century; the relative absence of Indians and especially girls from the high school system; the focus on the psychic terror of Indian men, who, as evidenced in court records from the period (see Mohammed), were not infrequently before the courts either as complainants against recalcitrant wives or as defendants who had inflicted physical abuse on such wives. Reports of endemic drinking/drunkenness combine with these records to indicate the trauma associated with a sense of masculinity under siege, as men were forced to cope with the dislocations in the new Caribbean space which troubled many of the gender expectations they had carried from India (this was of course, though in different ways, an experience of dislocation shared by men of all cultures, races and ethnicities who came to the Caribbean). It is tempting to speculate as to why Mootoo situates both her novels (*Cereus* and *He Drown She in the Sea*) in a fictional place which is nevertheless recognizably Trinidad: whether she was constrained by a sense of distance from a place in which she has not lived for many years (memory being unreliable?) or whether this more easily facilitated her own utopian reach towards a happy ending (supposing that in real time the acceptance that allows for happy endings for the social deviant is often not forthcoming).

- 9 With regard to the 'mode' of Tyler's narration: the fact that the narrative is pieced together from fragments of overheard gossip, speculation, vicarious imagining and creative patching over silences (Tyler more than once refers to himself as a kind of tailor, sewing fabrics together), seems to mirror the outcast's existence on the edge of worlds, and seems further to insist that it is the outcast who must tell the outcast's story, and in just such a way, from 'cast off' and 'liminal' materials.
- 10 The idea of the hijra as a blessing is fraught with much contradiction not only because of the outcast(e) status of the hijra community on the margins of the wider community, but also because hijras are greatly feared as a kind of 'arcane' presence that cannot be explained in terms of everyday understandings; the fear that they may have arcane powers that can be malevolently invoked is one reason they are accommodated at weddings and birth rituals. There seems to be a duality in the blessing they bring to the proceedings: a tension between the belief that they do have mysterious powers of blessing, and the belief that if they are welcomed, the curse they bring will be nullified—in this latter case, then, blessing inhabits a negative space as the absence of curse. See Jeffrey.
- 11 However, while men are not permitted to see or participate in the ritual, their presence is nevertheless registered in the form of tassa drummers, who beat their drums on the outskirts of the spot where the (hidden) ritual is performed. (See Baksh-Sooden and Mohammed.) Thus the ritual is haunted by the sense that the separation from men and by extension societal constraint is temporary, and that 'real time' inevitably segues back into carnival time.
- 12 According to Mohammed, woman in Indian ideology occupies the secondary role of seed-bearer, whereas man is seed and seed-giver. The seed analogy identifies woman with earth as mother (see Rampersad 40); this image then intersects paradoxically with the image of Kali, the dreaded mother goddess who in her myriad incarnations spans the seemingly antithetical powers of annihilation and redemption.
- 13 One of the gaps left by Mootoo's deliberately fragmentary narrative structure is the fact that we are not told whether Chandin's children were brought up in the religion and cultural customs of the Shivering Northern missionaries or the traditional (Hindu or Moslem) religion and customs of the Indian migrants to Trinidad. Given Chandin's bias, his and their mother's education and the latter's preference for her own culture, anything including a hybridic exposure, was possible. Despite the absence of a realist frame of information for Mala's upbringing in this regard, I find it possible to speak of the matikor rites as a residual memory/consciousness within Mala, by utilizing similar modes of pastiche to Tyler's. Imagining Mala as surrounded and affected by the cultural-historical context within which Mootoo places her, and taking into account the surrealist quality of the narrative of her devolutions, allows me to invoke a Jungian perspective on Mala's activities at this point.

- 14 Wynter and NourbeSe Phillip have in different ways examined the ways in which female sex as the ultimate marker of inferiority in Western culture became intersected by race in the post-Columbian era. Their discussions point to the black female slave as the ultimate outcast, since she was deprived not only of gender and sexual agency (being outside 'society') but also of humanity, being livestock.
- 15 I make a distinction here between the 'magic realism' of Euro-American critical discourse, and the 'marvellous realism' espoused by Hispanophone Caribbean and Latin American writers such as Carpentier and García Márquez. I argue that Mootoo does not espouse marvelous realism as such, because her technique in many respects invokes magic realism rather than marvelous realism—that is, she merges what can be termed naturalistic realism with what might be termed fantastical elements. The elements that are 'realistic' are often clearly differentiated from the more 'fantastical' elements and indeed that differentiation allows for the dichotomous vocabulary of 'magical' versus 'realism.' Further, this approach highlights 'magic realism' as a technique rather than a representation of a way of being. As explicated by Carpentier, in contrast, in 'marvellous realism' there is no separation between realism and fantasy—the society being represented is already characterized by a reality that is *entirely* marvelous. The writer simply finds a way of writing that represents that reality, in which the concept 'fantastical' does not exist since such a concept can be applied only from a (Westernized) logico-critical perspective that relegates anything different from itself to the realm of 'otherness.' See Carpentier's early essays reproduced in Zamora and Faris.
- 16 'Jamette' was originally used to refer to the carnival of the lower classes (ex-slaves in nineteenth-century Trinidad and some eastern Caribbean societies), as a way of distinguishing it from the carnival of the respectable classes. The word is a Creole (meaning in this case Caribbean vernacular) form etymologically related to the French 'diamètre'—diameter—used in this context to indicate a dividing line between superior and inferior classes. In modern day and contemporary usage, a jamette is variously a 'bad' woman, a 'loose' woman or a 'yard' woman' (a 'vulgar' or loud or ferocious, brawling kind of woman). Allsop also suggests a possible relation to the French 'jeanette,' a 'double barreled harlot' (194). NourbeSe Philip suggests the Wolof word 'jaam' [slave] as a possible origin (77).
- 17 'Douglarized': from *dougl'a* (also 'dougla'), a term used in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Guyana, St. Vincent to refer to someone of mixed African and Indian racial heritage. The term is originally pejorative but no longer necessarily so except in Indo-Caribbean communities.
- 18 Trinidadians use the term 'picong' to refer to the verbal repartee that characterizes Trinidad humour as a cultural phenomenon. (Picong humour is originally associated with the carnival practice in which calypsonians engage in spontaneous verbal battle through the use of rhymed songs, but the mode is in a general way very characteristic of the Trinidadian speech and sensibility.)

- 19 Mr. Hector, the almshouse gardener, appears as a potential ally who is moved to sympathy by the memory of a beloved brother who was sent away from the family in youth, because he exhibited 'effeminate' qualities. However, Mr. Hector remains constrained by the fear of community labeling opprobrium and so never quite becomes part of the Mala-Tyler-Otoh circle.
- 20 See note 10.
- 21 Lime is associated with healing and cleansing in some Caribbean societies.
- 22 The concept of a transcendental purity that outstrips the paradoxical law of death and renewal (this law as symbolized in human existence by the link between the eternal wheel of karma and cycles of reincarnation) finds more resonance in Islam and Christianity than in Hinduism. However, in suggesting that Mala's rituals resonate with matikor performance, I am not seeking to identify her with Hinduism but rather with Indo-Trinidadian culture, which even at the secular level is heavily influenced by Hinduism, but also by other religions, particularly Islam. As Mohammed points out, Hindu culture is not synonymous with Hinduism as a religion despite the influence of the latter upon the former.
- 23 At a recent conference, a presenter on *Cereus Blooms at Night* decided to read the graphic description of Mala's rape by her father after he discovers her with Boyie. The response from female members of the audience, including myself, was instructive. Several covered their eyes, ears, faces; at least one asked the (male) presenter to stop reading. This incident caused me to reflect on the fact that I have never been able to read that part of the novel. While I am not suggesting that it was the fact of his maleness that caused the presenter to ignore the obvious distress of his female audience, I could not help reflecting on how women seem to receive certain kinds of experience 'bodily': the women in the audience could not listen to the reading because of the sense of physical invasion—the real sense, and therefore the inadmissible possibility—of their own rape. The distancing that must be achieved in order to narrate such an experience suggests a kind of psychic dislocation as an aspect of creative art. Yet female writers routinely find it necessary to effect this psychic dislocation in order to authentically represent female experience. Morgan discusses the ways in which women writers represent rape in graphic, concrete terms focalizing the body's trauma, as opposed to the tendency towards abstract representation by male writers.

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